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LOCAL OBJECTS

by

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B.A., University of Santa Clara, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1977

Approved by:

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as if  
He wanted to make them, keep them from perishing,  
The few things, the objects of insight, the integrations  
Of feeling, the things that came of their own accord

--Wallace Stevens

All events and experiences are local, somewhere.

--William Stafford

$$\frac{1}{\sqrt{2}}$$



## MORNING IN PORTLAND

Observe coffee's made in a dream  
and it is not sun itself  
streaming through windows  
but dust's thousand constituents  
alive in aimless small thermals.

They recall the one night's  
motion in the arc of stars,  
the unnatural fall, the pale  
definition of remembered trees  
unaltered and constant, no moon.

Through glass this whole suburban hill  
looks ripe and budswollen--  
the burled oaks, rhododendron,  
azalea, maple and streetside cherry  
impromptu in a polka with wind,

a celebration of wild waving,  
soundless ecstasy for leaves.  
But the door's  
humble introduction:  
cold of steel ice,

and the ground firm  
as in some grey painting  
Siberian and winter, the cupolas  
iced over the dome  
and the sky frozen.

The one disturbance--roots  
moaning in bright sun.  
This is the richness, the world  
natural before meaning: dark coffee  
steaming warm in a warm room,

a robin plumped like a pillow on the fence.  
Two houses down the neighbor girl's  
doll has lost its head  
and it comes through the walls  
she is screaming, she is screaming  
Now she is quieted.

On the table condiments stand  
easy in their shadows, a ringed  
Stonehenge in the javelins of light.  
Outside trees dance, I call it dance,  
and the azaleas, Pacific rhododendrons.

## THE BOAT AT KELLY'S LAKE

was wooden, old white  
plywood. It registered  
seismographically  
every weak breeze,  
every shift. The peaks  
widened as they circled,  
the underworld set heaving, air  
wriggling in brown explosions.  
The waterplants waved like sound  
pulled by a thick wind.  
God was by the pier.

Once I reached my hand down  
wrist-deep in it, gooey, slick,  
brought up cupped in a palm several  
consistencies of mud  
and a salamander,  
soft under pressure,  
spotted yellow, moving  
confused in the air, both of us  
confused. It fell back  
and once in the water  
how it fell--clear,  
slow, in its own heaven.

## BOARDING HOUSE: CLYDE, MISSOURI 1926

--for Ida Louise Martindale.

The tablecloth stained,  
 every dinner is like every dinner.  
 That hall window upstairs  
 is the highest point for miles.  
 We've got three floors.  
 It will deceive you  
 how far those hills are,  
 the river with its trees between us.  
 Of our ground, one corner hill  
 is there, north, fences crazy.  
 Often I forget the graves.

Nights I can't stand boarders  
 or the railroad, I walk.  
 South is an old colony.  
 I wait the brightest moons  
 to see them, to keep from turning  
 an ankle in their caved burrows  
 empty for my sake and theirs.  
 This network of dark tunnels  
 contains a kind of quiet.  
 Dark has its own smell.  
 I love the hair to move on my neck.  
 Bird wings make small sounds.

Dear God: Your night goes for miles.  
 I know there is no river.  
 This year your church is 40, Geneva  
 is seven and she has an uncle in San Diego.  
 What is there here for her?

I give thanks  
 for my daughters,  
 for every rented room.  
 Give them daughters. Amen.

## NEWS

Your father's letter tells you of the fire  
and you see it hissing, stumbling into lake water,  
roaring over the canyon rim until that air  
wet from the west gave tractors room and time.

You remember deer tracks, years ago, discovering  
their hooves parallel like fingers in the dust,  
the dust sifted brown and flour.  
You remember an orange rubber raft,  
and that other raft, logs pitching  
with the slap of waves and your weight.  
You fished that afternoon, all afternoon  
your dangling feet moving under water like frogs.

You remember how gathering wood that night the dark  
scared you until the fire's light on the camper  
brought you back. There was something wrong.  
Three men left in the truck, one limping.  
You saw the abandoned shoe, the slice angling  
clean across the toe, full of red.  
And you stayed up late with them around the fire  
and they said he walked over calm as day to tell them.

## FIELD TRIP ST. PAUL CEMETERY 1959

Feeling for old gum under the seat.  
One farmhouse chimney so far back  
it manufactured all low clouds.  
Mrs. Shea: a hovering  
combination of stern grey angel and sheepdog.  
Mary's short  
straight black hair shook when she talked.  
Kelty saying

"Where is Canton, Ohio?"

Drake calling somebody stupid  
because 1826 was after Columbus.

Three of us ran back,  
stood right above Paul's chest  
and jumped.

No ground heave. No echoing  
divine consternation. He was dead  
and we imitated him waving us away,  
tears on his face, coughing  
like Jimmy's dad coughed.

Barbara was adamant  
dead first graders  
could read in heaven  
"Can't they Ms. Shea?"  
who was wet in the rain  
herding us towards the bus  
unsuccessfully.

We made brilliant paragraphs.

## LIGHT FOR THE CHAPEL OF THE DEAD

Here is my face  
on the glass, turquoise, azure,  
the smoke black borders.  
It is your face  
upon the stained glass,  
your darkened eyes, lips,  
and behind them the voice  
heard and remembered. And it is

her face, her dark eyes,  
the strange hood of something  
red shading darker. What words  
live in that mouth, the eyes  
human as cats'?  
There is nothing in them.  
There is no light in them.

The face on the glass--  
the granite  
rubble of the hill glowing at dusk  
glows as the face on the glass,  
composed with rigor, bright  
without particular words.

## HOMAGE TO A TABLE PURCHASED AT AUCTION

1.

Quietly nasturtiums orange the yard.  
April. A woman puts willowbuds  
in a vase, her mother's,  
porcelain from some place east.  
It stands alone on the table,  
as she leans back at the door, light  
thick, glowing through window dirt,  
willows outlined in sun  
and the sun coming yellow.

Its surface carries scars  
like crow's-feet around eyes,  
years of calm mornings mist rose  
from plowed fields and wrapped the house,  
and pot burns, a dime sized  
bleach of lye.

It recalls November, the '49 flood,  
men denying how cattle float dead--  
less like cattle than dolls.  
It recalls the blankness  
of their faces, how they sat  
late, saying nothing,  
coffee cold and the lantern  
hissing in its mantle.

And that night in '53,  
lights gone and roads  
iced slick as lakes,  
she was in her time.  
He fed that fire high and warm.  
No preacher. No doctor.  
Here and here underneath  
you can feel where she dug in,  
the size of her hands where she held.



2.

It waits its turn, one  
in a room of stacked tables, chairs.  
We see initials carved in the bottom,  
the lot number  
taped to one firm leg.

                  It stands  
pine, yellow and hay color,  
grained in lines and clotted dark knots  
thinning yellow dark  
and hay color-- a surface  
wooden, mute as horizons,  
saying nothing, remembering nothing.  
Dust has settled on it a thin  
yellow film. We bid it  
alone, as is. It goes cheap.

## LOCAL OBJECTS

Not of itself does this wall niche  
beget its own objects more than ornamental,  
more than the shrunken heads  
of oranges left months behind books,  
the ashes of any loyal terrier  
in their grey urn, and this  
translucent 17th century  
Venetian cameo, this rusted spike  
from the Baltimore and Ohio. No,

it is late autumn and shirtsleeves,  
a cirrus haze and the blue washed out  
and he paints twin Ponderosa pine cones  
splayed like quills, the ruddy  
frictionlessness of chestnuts, one bone  
scallop shell spread like an ivory fan.  
And here in this clear pane of glass  
in the distance with a street and two chimneys--  
the body almost his other body, hands  
in deep pockets and her face rosy and dreaming.

## SCENE IN REAL LIFE

The terror of eviction,  
we wrapped in tattered rags, homeless,  
tramping house to house, town to town  
tubercular and tired, this finding the rent check  
two days past due unmailed under other papers  
sent me out in drumming rain

past mothers, cabbies in line,  
some curlered, all eyeing through fogged windows  
the floodgates. Then, in their blur of running  
a flurry of small coats burst, inundated the sidewalk.  
All along the line engines cough, the drivers  
gesticulating wildly, all around short legs  
pumping, thermoses clanking loose in lunchboxes, doors  
swinging open, admitting and closing, and some  
one way, others illegally U-turning the other

leaving an empty old school breathing relief,  
and up ahead one small orange person  
slickered, galoshes to the knees, a lone marauder  
sloshing ripples foaming to the grass, and  
pausing, perhaps having learned they would otherwise drown,

bending in a motion Brueghel mastered,  
bending now and again to save limp worms.

## ALASKA AND THE NEW YORK COAL SHORTAGE OF 1918

Your mother who  
is no better gives you  
the burlap potato bag  
and a quarter: "Don't  
come back unless it's full"  
and you race hall and stairs  
like a noisy locomotive, down  
steps to the street

where it is quiet so you  
are quiet, the bag empty  
and smelling of potatoes  
over your shoulder as you go  
whistling down 87th.  
You call it adventure  
for gold, each coal door  
a mine, Alaskan, spitting  
nuggets, a six-gun  
on your hip against poachers.  
By 2 you're colder and spend  
your quarter for chocolate  
and a big red fish for your dogs.  
You walk by a man  
with short hair on his face.  
He wants your gold.  
As he runs you hear  
his pants flap against his legs.  
He breathes funny  
and shouts something at you  
rounding the corner. On 54th  
you find where there is  
a fire and get past  
the policeman because he  
doesn't see you, and you go  
straight to the coal cellar  
under some boards  
and it is Alaska again.

Later in your black face  
you climb stairs, drop  
the dusty bag heavily to the floor.  
Your mother is in the next  
room. You tell her

and before she answers  
you turn down stairs  
to feed the team again.  
They have waited for you,  
hungry, drooling in their traces.  
They gnash their teeth  
and eat like vacuum cleaners.

## UNTITLED

--August, Borrego Springs

God's face is granite,  
the face of cactus, sand,  
with no softness.  
The trees here: palm and smoke.  
The palms droop date heavy  
with no movement but wind  
sweeping  
in a rush across the floor,  
wife with an impatient broom.

Last night they lay together  
in the moon's fullness, wind and granite  
in a serenade,  
the wild howling of dogs,  
in the quiet  
black pulse of stars.

And now their children surround us.  
And are not mountains,  
but evidence of old pain,  
a line of scars across a valley  
solid in almost motion, and heat  
rising in blue.

It is only heat, what the mind  
makes in absence,  
geologies of angle and rust.  
It is a face of scars. Wind shaped.  
It glows and in the time of its own time  
seems to hum, a moan, unheard,  
a voicing of no translation,  
nothing with a name.

## CLAMMING KIPSAN BEACH

As you leave eelgrass  
the ocean's a distant rumor  
and fog swirls where you have not been.  
On firm sand you find gulls  
have left their four pointed tracks  
aimless as fog. You think  
no one here has heard of the sun,  
all sweat interior,  
behind a face  
and quiet as silvered boards.  
In your hand you find the shovel  
is like no spade, long and awkward  
as you stomp heavy-footed, watching  
for where the sand goes  
down without warning.

And when it does you dig  
with that long blade,  
forgetting whether clams angle  
burrowing seaward  
or go opposite in clam wisdom.  
You hit nothing at all  
but the sea  
filling from that deep well,  
caving what you dig.  
Then down on one knee  
sand takes all you offer,  
wrist and elbow gone and numb,  
the waves huge white mountains  
moving under spray. Then  
answering long distance--  
that slick shell  
with its own mind pulling in your palm.

## COUNTING

Through thin walls the neighbors'  
earnest conversation, gunshots,  
body through a glass door, shards falling  
as snow  
falls through sunlight, quietly  
filling the tracks.  
Snow catches everything equally.  
I hear their television.

In dark the table ten feet away  
recedes towards a wall,  
towards the stove. I praise  
the industry of lawn mowers, the circular  
clatter of tricycles.

Blue napkins go black, as birds  
they fail. The refrigerator has a broken shelf,  
radio schedule, menus,  
a towel in the handle.  
Four hours west plovers understand the Pacific.  
Praise their quick noise and the awkward  
large paws of puppies.

Praise this evening's list of events  
on the bulletin board of dark brown cork  
between my left ear,  
the one that works less well,  
and the other, the mystic  
sure the coleus says hello.  
My friends, these are also my friends:

Here is rime ice.  
Here is the blue-eyed grass.



## OAK

It appears  
with the slow pleasure of craft,  
a sculptor's,  
the simmerings of a high chef--  
an indulgent spoon.  
It knows entire lives  
and predicted your name.  
When it goes manic through plums  
mushrooms applaud.

Some nights  
it hisses like an insect  
in heat, or for revenge.  
When dogs bark in dreams  
I fear intruders. Surveyors  
say the land is theirs. In yours  
Grandma Armantage lives.

It ignores the angers  
of our neighbor. It harbors  
neither love nor animosity,  
bears the nails of some childhood  
without grudge. And when it comes out  
late in May, this is  
the slow pleasure  
bodies teach each other.

2.

## REBUTTAL

Regardless of what's said,  
throw stones, round, heavy.  
The water ripples out  
wide and languid.

In certain streams they  
feed, suckling their hollows numb  
on starlight, the daily visible  
twigs, leafbits oval in backwash,  
glint of gemstained aura of air,  
and how other air  
sucked blue and unwilling down  
where stones are  
yet rises.

So they grow,  
break surface finally.  
After winters sprout moss  
thick to hold the heat in.  
We have used them for seats,  
eaten lunch, all the while  
water butting against them.  
They never shudder.

Later so huge the stream moves,  
shouldered to one side.  
Fish hide in back water  
and current strokes  
full along cold walls.

When a dimness fingers in,  
grows bold among forms,  
(cliffs, rounded stones, the undersides  
of leaves) and sounds rustle in branches,  
take wing, say  
a brilliant stippled boulder  
rises from far over that hill,  
large and wet with glistening,  
and say it's not important  
where, or from what stream,  
only this rippling out  
wide, languid, filling the world.

## PATRICIA FLINT

It begins  
Patricia Flint, you are wanted,  
Please report...

It's not the police  
This is America. It is  
A memory of your sister asking for lemonade.  
Your home town, the Chamber of Commerce,  
Mayor, the high school band at the airport.  
It is nothing--  
Your construction worker father  
Impaled on a cement truck. An emergency,  
Saint Patrick's called. They need blood,  
Yours--type B  
Negative and rare. Voices seek you from walls.  
The summons are everywhere.  
They will find you.

Today it is understood  
You're out of town, resting.  
You had the blood, red,  
A memory matching your sister's.  
The plane landed on time. The band played in key.  
It's understood the body they repaired  
Was not your father.  
We see in your absence  
The green more yellow on a branch  
Gathering from some place deep,  
A well in the dark.  
Look up however quick, it stops.  
This is natural.  
Next week life as usual.  
Any name will haunt you.

## GIRL WITH CLOSED EYES

You sit  
back  
firm against rock  
legs folded carefully  
and elbows  
rising slow as new breasts  
as you breathe

For as you breathe you find  
familiar caves  
sunlight  
and no bats  
Friends you had forgotten  
bring children and bicycles  
cinquefoil and bluets  
plates of steaming mushrooms  
They know you  
and love your father

They go black to gull wings and one  
dazzling of wind  
a beach where you birth moons  
anemones and stars  
and all the gulls are friends  
and all the gulls have names

In this way  
you sit  
forever firm against a rock wall  
There is small wind  
and the bee  
traversing your calf  
cross-stubble the pollenless field  
dreams

stonecrop

columbine

summer all October  
your soft red hair

## WORDS IN WET WEATHER

Its dirt spills  
liquid down wooden steps  
where the cat toppled it a month ago.

Windward, it's soaked rain, late sun,  
and altered,  
climbs faithless

in natural slow geometry.  
We left it,  
time figured short against a freeze.

Today five days into a new year  
cold rain falls on strings  
and the geranium, haggard, sick

green, bears at a queer angle,  
as angels  
its vermillion blooms.

Their red is neither pain  
nor refusal. They are stolid  
as horses in a grey field.

Theirs will be natural  
random deaths.  
We are inside and dry.

They have nothing to do with us.

## DAMAGES

All afternoon order  
among the dead hawthorns,  
cedars, the apple roots  
clotted like hair, the limbs  
--casualties in their sheared bark--  
hanging like soldiers  
limp on the wire,  
soldiers at the Somme  
in fading pictures, their smell  
limp on the wire, their skins  
peeled smooth from their bones  
and the bones themselves  
splintered, still slick  
with their former lives.

All afternoon that dull  
indifferent quiet, the instrument  
raw under my thumb.  
As after time at sea  
the ground  
has its tides, so the hand  
kept its empty grip,  
its death claw.  
And their lost parts  
mounted up in the charnel house,  
the repository of wrists and fibula,  
our cellar-full of raw firewood  
burning for weeks,  
our cellar of the thousand  
red delicious apples.

And still they maintain themselves  
as does this woman they interview  
here with dinner, whose daughter  
they found that way, who has  
neither answers nor tears  
as the weather  
changes and our palms  
open to their flames,  
their smoke rising outside, nowhere,  
curling down gutters  
into the hollow of the yard.

We smile swallowing drinks,  
discounting the impossible

bizarre reunions, any  
brothers and sisters among the maimed.  
Later we sip Zinfandel and talk  
and the Somme flows through France  
hours away peaceful as smoke.  
We believe these words  
"weather" "crime" "accident"  
and the men whistle their old tunes,  
bloodless tunes, composing  
and decomposing in half light,  
and we are like them.



## MOVING HERE

Out our window: vacant,  
no human contour, no scorn.  
Nothing but the silence  
of humped brown earth rising like an animal,  
gullies bleeding mud raw downstream.  
When wind moves over the horses  
--those cropping snow, grass--  
they lift their heads, fear  
in the air, wary, their brothers lost.

Here trails go bald, landscape  
of white, twisted grotesques, rock,  
ice thick as fists over mute water,  
cold claiming skin and no return.  
Here mountains are an Eden for goats.  
Winter is coal, persistent death,  
shafts and towns crumbling to a known past.  
The paper reports him alive, 41,  
exposure, omitting he was naked  
to the world and gesturing  
a tree on his children's death.  
All afternoon horses browse,  
miniatures high on the mountain,  
all around them barbed fences  
waving like the breath of wheat.

Dusk at four, sky lowering  
like a vise. We pull the curtains early.  
Yesterday sun bore like a corkscrew  
through fog, clearing its own corridor  
and deepening solid as gold,  
rectangular at our feet.  
All winter we live in two rooms  
and stay warm.  
There is much to learn.  
Deborah, I love you more.

## HOW TO BATTLE DEPRESSION

Marvel at clothes,  
 the colors you can't name, puce  
 and chartreuse for instance,  
 the impossible to spell.  
 Count the navy blues in a minute.  
 Count shoes, anything.  
 Pick five and ignore everything else.  
 Smell people. Read a paper  
 while you do it, act  
 nonchalant. Read an old paper.

Go swimming. Systematically  
 forget drowning, your weight, the depth.  
 Tie and retie your shoes.  
 Eat something to make you guilty.  
 Think of India.  
 Find a public place and stay near the door,  
 look up whenever someone passes.  
 Not one will do anything.

Then proclaim impotence.  
 Choose clothes to emphasize  
 your worst features.  
 Cry over spilt milk. Vote.  
 Count your leaky faucet an asset,  
 your windows clean.  
 Write long letters to relatives in Kansas.  
 Do nothing. Do not feed the ants.  
 Believe depression the only way to live.  
 Face death like a brother.

And if some dark night  
 you turn to this in panic

no voices will hold you, neither whispers,  
 nor the small applause in leaves,  
 granite, or salal.  
 You have no company,

these are echoes of your own voice.

WHY YOU GIVE  
TO THE AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

You can't say no. The girls  
on your porch believe  
they are not too young for women.  
A calculated effect is still effective.  
When you open the door  
with a towel, your hands sudsy,  
they smile. It means you're liberated.  
And they have a pamphlet.

You think of Charlie, the beagle  
your Aunt has, blind, senile,  
bumping the ottoman, the sofa, a chair.  
Cut nineteen times, every growth  
a perversion. He needs something,  
compassion, or a new doctor.  
When he forgets the room  
you are the one embarrassed.  
Dead this week: kidney failure.

They smile healthy teeth.  
Dishes can wait. Your wife has the flu.  
Because cancer is funny  
and it's the second warm evening in two days.

## EVENING AT HOME

You sit outside after dinner  
 seeing or not seeing the mugo pines,  
 the brown cat on the walk . . .

It's the backyard you planned,  
 rock tiers tapering  
 in the hands of an elder German mason,  
 that story I think I remember.

You saw the spirea planted, the arborvitae  
 hedge now taller than either of us.  
 The grass was yellow-green then, thin as pins.  
 You're not just watching  
 how light goes, or wind moves.

I count your stories like change, quarters,  
 solid as lunch money years ago in a pocket.

1922, the old world--  
 Scotland, cross country, the Atlantic  
 and with your father to his birthplace:  
 the house Linden Lee, St. Mark's Place, Portobello.

Your bad dream,  
 The Saturday Evening Post sold after school  
 door to door. Perhaps some moment in San Francisco,  
 happy, honeymoon at the St. Francis 30 years ago.  
 Or going up Sandy Boulevard backwards, the Essex,  
 first car, stuck in reverse . . .

On warm concrete  
 the cat sleeps like a blanket.  
 In the greenhouse, fuchsias  
 multiple pastels, clean grit of loam under nails,  
 star of Bethlehem, geranium, impatiens, cactus  
 more colorful, more predictable than sons.

I see you in near dark  
 your face forward  
 in the flare of a match, leaning back.  
 Wind moves easy through hill poplars.  
 We sit a long time and neither of us says anything.  
 We sit until all the lights are on  
 then walk in together.

## MAKING THIS

Imagine imprisonment  
in a tree, hemlock,  
coastal spruce.  
Sunlight taps the brown bark  
and your fingers  
pressing from the inside  
feel a tapping.

Dream a last day.  
Do not consider adoption  
or the worth of a brother.  
Forget everyone.

Remember only that cold  
salt water offering its way home.  
Strollers watch from the beach.  
It is sunny and their faces  
appear worried.  
Remember the cliff face  
saying nothing,  
crumbling in your hand,  
under your boot, then  
the fine ledge your flesh fell into...

Here it is:  
the list that could go  
on for pages  
can stop here,

you're that lucky.

## THE HOODOOS IN YOHO

On the upper slopes  
they stand as sentinels,  
they stand and quiver in wind.  
Since there is no one here  
they are allowed  
to quiver as saplings,  
thin poles of pine  
that one white day  
quiver in their heavy coats  
and bow.

We have traveled 700 miles,  
the deaths of wing flies and yellow Victors,  
then walked,  
our baggage of ocean  
sloshing and pumping,  
our calves in knots,  
to this place 5000 feet in blue.

Above us these standing composites,  
the scree of glaciers under flat capstones,  
they have seen what they believe.  
They have seen the hour and rumble  
of their death. Tonight  
since we are not here  
in wind cool down this canyon  
they quiver with Orion. Below,  
each tree an animal,  
thousands have stopped their migrations.  
The river thin silver among them.

This is the world we breathe,  
rock, half moon, and star.  
The far valley, composed  
in the intensity of their quiet looking.  
This wind is their cool breath.

## OPEN LETTER

Grandfather,  
I know your paintings like weather.  
The shadowed water full with pickerel,  
lazy eels. Green elms shading farm buildings  
small across a stubble-brown field of barley.  
And the place along the firth,  
schooner, the road into trees and the unnamed  
town. The pilings you brushed are tall  
forever in slack tide, alders groved  
holding firm. Some days  
their emptiness goes through me like wind.

I keep your name and what facts I know.  
You sailed, landing suddenly American, loved  
the pale woman in the picture, and your sons.  
After 20 years sailed again for home, Scotland,  
thinking to send for them. And stayed 3 weeks.  
Finally Portland, Oregon, where the railroad was home.

Tonight, sunk deep in Scotch malt,  
I see watercolors faded under glass  
and the glass itself warping time original and old.  
Wind at the pane flows off highland green,  
highland stone. And the room--your barn  
hung amber with lanterns--cuts it like a plow,  
its noise dying over the North Sea, drowned  
in our drink and talk, toasts, the clapping  
and warm dance. While all evening our firstborn,  
your great-grandchild newly christened,  
sleeps in the next room like a package  
partially unwrapped, in cotton and warm greasewoolen.

## ERNIE

3 AM and saws  
whine every wall swollen, sound  
leaking from cracked windows,  
the settled doors.  
Frost has pinked our red car. .  
The blur twins them, these hands  
stacking wood, not my hands.  
Ernie's here, his hat  
felt, grey felt and no feather. Surely  
some head is under there, pale but there.  
He lives with his daughter.  
Three months  
neither of us miss a day.

He has nine fingers and ignores  
the loss, the saw taunted  
with each pass--no bone,  
no knuckle. This is normal.  
Two others lose, calmly  
they cross the street,  
the office floor red, again  
waiting to cross, casual,  
a red handkerchief.  
Long past dark the saws  
continue eating. I see them  
gone to the elbows,  
pushing wood with stumps. Dream.  
It was razed last year in three days.  
These hands are not my hands.  
The wood comes, they stack it.  
Ernie's here. The room is loud.  
He is hard of hearing.



## DREAMING NEBRASKA

You anchor, dredge up sandwiches.  
In quiet the smell of salt  
and dead gulls congeals on a slick railing.  
It infiltrates clothes you always burn.  
It tours your liver, kidneys, brain,  
bowels, marrow, and comes out a yawn.  
The ocean stretches flat as a plate.

A funeral. Flowers and the smell  
of flowers--lilacs, lilies. The neighbors  
laugh. They burn, wisping and flicking  
themselves at you. They play on the windshield,  
between fingers and face. They swallow voices.  
The one sound is liquid in a restless bilge.

Nights they walk your fenceline with dogs.  
Around a fire they snap bird wings for fun.  
You hear them through your window, children  
wearing masks, elephants, grotesque gorgons.  
Your clothes fit them. When you go back  
the house is the same. Their dogs snap  
and you kick. You kick teeth in like glass.

Motor dead, water slaps the hull. You drift  
watching their salmon-pink faces grin out of range.

## RIDDLE

Weightless and pure as water,  
it has no recognizable features.  
Because it is perfect in its presence,  
suddenly in its presence we are perfect.

Every scene  
composed in wild, perfect exuberance.  
When you run over thick, lush grass,  
your legs uncertain as a drunk's,  
you run under blue-  
green maples and it's never too hot.  
Wind moves in your soft hair, spun  
blonde as your mother's. We are,  
children and adults, our perfect selves.

Like the place we stayed years ago  
on the ocean, where fog moved  
cut in streamers by pines, cut  
by our heads, the blunt edges of our clothes,  
and then regrouped closing behind us like an envelope.  
We could hear surf  
roar somewhere ahead,  
so we moved slow, blind.

Within its boundaries you can be  
any age, and we are never incompetent.

We look into fog,  
as even now in the womb  
you kick and poke with your small hands.

3.

## PICTURES FROM THE CZECH PILGRIMAGE

## I.

You stand on some hill.  
Over your shoulders, below you,  
two old women,  
their grey discs too distant for faces,  
and one smaller, a daughter, we can't be sure.  
There are many we can't see.

The three of you do not understand  
Marketa Luskacova. The middle one  
carrying the cross, frowns,  
not understanding, and with its weight.  
The other two carry pikes.  
You have come in your lined faces,  
canvas coats and your whiter shirt.  
The cross has a ladder up to the beam,  
a nail, branches of a hawthorn  
curved, its long spikes. A grey hammer  
is attached, and thick heavy tongs.  
The letters at the top  
do not say in Rhode Island.

## II.

The women in white  
carry huge madonnas in gilt rococo frames.  
They lead, and the men  
in black behind them.  
The line they make: black upper left  
down across the hay field, white near the woods.

## III.

The pillar is taller than the man with large ears,  
his head angled, his eyes, his open mouth.  
He holds a paper and must be chanting.  
The congregation sits, an old woman,  
white face and hands, a black hooded cape,  
she neither hears nor sees, she is inside.

## IV.

It is a world of old women.  
That plaid can't be called a dress.  
She is no older, no more lined  
than the land she came from.

## V.

This is enough.  
They are seated on a fine hillside. The far hill  
has farms, a road along the river.  
There are no children.  
He stares, looking away below,  
or at the new hands on his knees.  
She is younger, face intent on some patch of grass,  
hearing only.  
She looks on him, fingers holding up a cheek,  
frowning, thinking.  
The old one has pain.  
Three others stand. And the priest,  
flowers bloom at his feet,  
what he says is nowhere in the picture.

## WALKING BEFORE DUSK

Opening the door, air comes  
unconditional, what we love to breathe.  
Old rain drips under every skeletal cherry.  
Creaking uphill, we notice how smart water is.

Trees mold soundless,  
removed completely from football,  
70,000 in New Orleans watching the Saints,  
the lady who ran down the sidelines topless.

Everywhere the warm steam of decay  
mingles with our breath, rises towards rafters,  
the gaps blue can't fill.  
We kick among maple leaves, veins  
dark in their lines yet holding the parts together.  
We walk holding hands together, amazed,  
our fourth winter in four years.

## YOU ARE BOTH MEN

1.

It is a morning limp and dead  
as old lettuce. Not Florida, here  
the ground's depressions are full, water  
moving at a slow boil in puddles  
between the rails,  
the rails shining like coins.

If it were Florida, you think the beach  
would be made of the smallest warm coals.  
And under this Florida sky, under clear water  
dolphins squeak articulate and rise  
with original grace, the air  
welcoming them warm as their skins  
take sun and hurl light spears. . .

2.

Far down tracks the engine  
light is pearl, the switchmen late  
playing poker and everyone a winner.  
Rain falls hollow on boxcars.

Your job is checking them empty.  
One still shiny as bright rust  
held two dozen refrigerators. The old  
Great Northern rusts inside out smelling  
of Tennessee. Finally you hear  
the switchengine bells down track  
slow, rhythmic as a Guernsey walking.

And there's a drunk asleep under a grain car,  
one ankle resting white on the rail.

You kick the holey sole of his shoe  
like so much wood, and he rolls  
moaning out the other side.  
Had you kicked yourself it would have been  
no different, no different, no different.  
You do not see him,  
will never see him again.  
The switching's done. It rains  
and neither of you thinks about anything.

## BLUE SUNDAY

It seems in daylight,  
the daylight defined by this tall window,  
it seems this wooden stool is honest,

the daylight honest. Even the stained  
glass in an old church seems honest.  
They say, We have something to tell you,

something you cannot hear, something  
no effort on your part will yield,  
something even we are not sure of.

We will tell you of ourselves,  
the truth in flutes, the importance  
rocks have, skipping flat over flat water.

We see you watching us  
like a deaf man, or one so near to deafness  
lips make a difference.

The wood in your hand is footworn,  
smooth and creased with the lines of small pebbles.  
The window

recreates itself, longer, on the floor.  
We see the questions in your face,  
the smile, and behind the smile

the apparent bravery of emptiness.  
We are telling you, you are mistaken here,  
here whole landscapes live and evolve.

All your ancestors are alive, waiting  
an introduction. War is here, a man  
enjoying sun in a trench,

a man with one foot, blind, a tattered  
list of old jokes in a pocket.  
Henry has forgotten all he needed to forget.

Your parents are here, real and otherwise.  
Their dim faces show  
an abstract curiosity in your reactions.



Things you have totally forgotten  
the significance of, are also here,  
the attic where dust is not allowed.

Nothing will insist itself,  
nothing will shout This is fact.  
They live and will continue regardless

of what you say, regardless  
of what television indicates,  
regardless of money. We are telling you

daylight defined by this tall window  
is honest, the wooden stool is honest with its grain  
and shadows, the glass in an old church is itself.

We are telling you on this blue Sunday  
we see you, we see your face,  
you can believe us.

## HAVING MY STROKE

--for DorAnn and Herb Kasube.

That night I got up thinking  
my stomach  
the objects in my left eye blurred,  
the bathroom tiles moved.  
Your name was a song.  
I sang.

Your fear,  
the manipulations of your face,  
your voice cracking from beyond a canyon,  
I hated your fear. Who has done this?  
I'm told that as one lifts  
carefully the back off a watch,  
so was my skull lifted.  
Something wrong in the works.  
I remember cold.

It's been years.  
I do not wish living  
only in this world.  
That hand I was sure  
was yours, without seeing it.  
You've told me it was a firm grip.  
It was the one option open.  
I need your hand. Convince me.

Of Intensive Care I remember  
you, your parents, machines,  
a white atmosphere.

For some reason  
I saw my shoes under the desk,  
loafers needing polish.  
That picture is still tacked to the shelf.  
The seat cushion waits  
slightly out of alignment.  
The books, pencils, stapler,

they all wait.  
And I walk in the door.

My progress has been remarkable.  
Any progress is remarkable.  
Some things I don't remember,  
I know my name. Hair covers the scars.  
When we talk about next week I believe it.

## AGAIN, TRILLIUMS

Today no questions.  
For night has formed from itself natural scrubgrass,  
fern, salal, hellebore, the yellow-flowered skunk  
cabbage, raccoons  
ethical as cats,  
ouzels over fast water,  
and the near canyon wall, its edge sunlit  
statuary, solid  
as a bronze finger.

For this morning oxalis open  
like wings, all whitebirds and robins home. Slugs  
ride the freeways,  
and confined in light, tubers burst in their dark  
then bring punctual as bakers a dozen  
without song, white as trumpets.  
And lucent on cabled stems, veins  
claret, deep in their bells,  
they sway random in a flaring of long shadows.

Those shadows move in a thousand angles--  
dark lines in a soapy field of toadstools.

For the sun knows them unquestionably  
rising from mud and moss, deep-rooted, alive, green  
and literal as milk.

## TO THE WOMEN WHO SAID WE WERE CRAZY

--Long Beach, Washington

We knew  
against osmosis skin loses,  
this same water scraped seal off Aleutians  
two hours ago,  
and the sun's impotence.  
And everything goes blue as litmus,  
our new blood, as we  
grinning lunatics, lungs  
expanding in dry ice, slosh out  
on feet animate as peculiar driftwood.  
Of their own volition the toes  
disassociate for a last ditch stand with the middle lives.  
The Cessna at fifty feet  
sees us and shivers back.

And the light  
like drops on a hot skillet  
on breakers, white dazzling choices:  
inglorious wash, or the clean gesture--  
dive, grey under, still.  
Cold constricting like a hand.  
Then we're up  
whooping, diving.  
Gulls scatter for miles.  
And this far west,  
but for two distant figures standing  
on the water, well-bundled, waiting,  
how easy we could make for China.

## VISITING IN LAGUNA

Though seven years dead  
 should that tough old Swede  
 appear from his room (the guest room)  
 he'd recognize 1969,  
 the forest etching--its road  
 lost under silver leaves--  
 still over the same beige couch  
 and just as it hung  
 30 years in his mother's house.  
 He'd recognize the purple  
 lush loveseat  
 contained in its Victorian filigree  
 and under the fisherman and his wife,  
 companion portraits.  
 Nothing has come between them.

I knew this carpet, Oriental,  
 darker in another livingroom  
 where I first learned to walk,  
 always heavy curtains at the window.  
 Your beach house has one wall  
 a wide expanse of glass.  
 And we watched baseball, the Yankees,  
 while hazed freighters move in an afternoon  
 small as untouchable miniatures on one shelf,  
 those elephants  
 in descending size--  
 interlocking trunks and tails.

This room holds  
 the volume of your lives together.  
 And you are the absent king,  
 emperor of trains,  
 the one obvious reason.  
 In five years she's traveled  
 Europe, New England, and Alaska,  
 and brought nothing to this room  
 but Gothic books, pink  
 knitting established on a chair.

After lunch we wander shops,  
 expensive crystal, one full of Christmas,

another of flowers, spices, small antiques.  
She says "Oh I look,  
but I won't buy anything now.  
Any more would be useless clutter."  
We tell her we've moved  
and the weather where we live  
is never good.

## FROM HERE

From here a paper slapping down,  
or cold, or the neighbor's dog  
frenzied behind a chainlink fence,  
harmless. The birch limb  
set that way--  
some cat-frightened bird, or wind.  
No giants in shadows.

Mornings the house--  
not just the quiet of bees' husks  
in a pickle jar,  
but the hush of church,  
spiders the sole occupants,  
busy in brown rafters.  
Quiet as cumulus in motion.

The dim hallway had doors tall enough  
for giants. From yours  
your forms were mountains,  
curled, one snoring.

Then pulling on clothes  
you must have wondered absently  
or later over eggs,  
wondered where I came from  
so fast asking your bed  
(huge, wider than my widest arms, pillows  
incredible deep hills)  
to sleep there  
in the perfect safety of where you were.



## WALKING BEVERLY BEACH

Always it has never been like this.  
Eye level gulls flying, mouths open,  
eyes wide set, never really hungry,  
flare in a baring of underwings  
and fold.

    The brown sand  
a composite  
brown no brain can remember,  
where it's wet is greyer.

                    Overhead  
wisps like steam quick enough to taste  
elongate in a whisper  
white and salt.  
Pebbles wash in a water hiss uphill,

back in small pebbly rumbles,  
the sand retreating like arrows  
and foam  
skewed by slick oceangreen vegetables,  
clear Japanese jello.  
Sand dollars carry five mute doves.

In pools anemones are home  
and mussels refuse interiors.  
Toes disappear there,  
retreating, defeated. Sun  
cooling  
dyes their surfaces delicate rose,  
itself dies--  
an acceptance gulls and red cliffs  
witness longer than we do

except here, now, this other place.

## AGREEMENT

Why have you chosen to sit  
directly opposite me,  
your collar length brown hair,  
averted eyes, the angled  
peering at some page  
you turn suddenly  
as if to hold it would be burning.  
You woman with your coat on  
as though you will plunge  
into perfumed trenches any minute:  
go. Leave me this space  
empty  
not crowded in some close  
too pretty swish of hair.  
Nor do you read  
this face opposite you, the frown,  
the pure attempt to concentrate,  
block you out, which  
  
is no use.  
I am glad you have taken that chair.  
You yawn, please, you must be warm,  
take off your coat.  
We will get along you and I  
and not say a word.  
Neither of us will see the other.  
  
Good. It is agreed.

## THE POSSUM ON OLESON ROAD

Say that night  
 in a methodical breach of protocol  
 joyously it squandered a perfect feast of trash.  
 Dips (cucumber and sour cream), pate  
 of liver, crackers, and cheese  
 yellow with leaf garnish, table under moon.  
 Say once it had eaten, then it ate again, past  
 any reasonable limit, pink feet working  
 like furious scoopers under a perfect snout.

Then leaving the cans rolled and glinting  
 it waddled belly-full and sleepy  
 down the dark ravine.

Later it must have risen  
 groggy, doubting any animal could be that lucky,  
 disbelieving even its own pouched stomach.  
 And began climbing then, fur heavy  
 with night water, climbing through briar shadows,  
 nettles, singleminded until I saw it  
 through the car's warm drone,  
 its retinas dull red, lifting  
 too late one pink hand.

It was habitual inertia, nothing  
 ethical took me back  
 after sundown the next day, the same road  
 curved as flat rivers, houses acres apart,  
 except the pavement

--and I knew the place--  
 everywhere I looked it was clean as a washboard.

Say for ten hours under nettles  
 and fern whorls it shook for each breath, its eyes  
 full with that meal and two  
 bulging headlights.

Say then it slept.  
 all the warm afternoon dreamless as dirt  
 and woke at dark, hungry, with no memory.  
 Stiff, it stretched, and began browsing the ravine.

## JOURNAL ENTRY

Morning. Seven days now  
since we crossed the pass,  
a heaven of blue asters  
and pines like shrunk, weathered men.  
There is no way describing these mountains.  
They tower over us  
with a sound of their own, the wind,  
the slow etch of ice.  
One animal seems to follow us,  
a rodent, its twit twit echoes face  
to granite face. It stops when we stop.  
Killed a hoary marmot yesterday,  
a tough creature, for food.

Evening. Wood scarce. I have  
just these few minutes. A ptarmigan  
soars against the darkening sky.  
Here Boston is an illusion  
that requires a full belly and fifteen minutes  
alone to summon up. Jackson's knee  
is no better. All day he rode the mule  
and tonight it is suffering.  
Not one of us is far from the edge.  
We sleep too well. Tonight I will dream  
not meat, not the house with windows,  
I will dream your warm body here.  
There are a thousand stars.

## OLD WOMAN ON THE BUS

As gravity the slow  
settling of chemicals  
as an oxidation every turn  
settles you  
comfortably  
in a nodding

a halo of grey hair  
a corona

On the periphery  
we suppose the hand in your purse  
clutches money or cancer  
and the other  
a jellyfish  
a daughter's small children  
the resolute  
perfect curves of their hair  
and five fingers  
perfect around your thumb  
your veins like surface roots  
entwined  
with regular pulse

Nothing will  
overshadow your presence  
The crest of Vermont rouses you  
an uphill  
neither the rise  
nor fall of a hotel's stairs  
You adjust your hat  
a habit your mother had for church  
Looking for keys you find your father  
liquor and the leather belt  
and snap shut the purse  
Then the long processional

the green Buick  
a house  
a refrigerator with tomatoes  
cantaloupe

and resuming an afghan for Jenny  
You have friends next door  
Your geraniums hover  
a brilliant splash  
the length of your porch

Everyday the body you've known for years  
and something like your soul  
rises at 45th and gets off.

## NOTES

"Light for the Chapel of the Dead", p. 13: based on a stained glass window in the Church of Our Lady of All Grace, located in Assy, France. See Splendors of Christianity, commentary by Dmitri Kessel, p. 245.

"The Hoodoos in Yoho", p. 36: Yoho National Park, British Columbia, Canada.

"Pictures from the Czech Pilgrimage", p. 42: based on a series of photographs titled "The Czech Pilgrimage". Taken by Marketa Luskacova, they appeared in London Magazine, Vol. 15, Number 5.